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Silent No Longer: Confronting Sexual Violence in the Left

Rebecca Winter

NOT MY COMRADES
I THINK SHE MADE THE WHOLE THING UP.
SHE'S JUST A CRAZY BITCH.
LOOK, SWEETIE
CLASS SHOULD COME FIRST. THE REST IS JUST DIVISIVE.
IT'S NOT REALLY AS BAD AS YOU SAY IT IS.

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In 2012, a member of the UK Socialist Workers Party (SWP) came forward saying she had been raped and sexually harassed by the former National Secretary of the organisation, Martin Smith. The internal 'investigation' which followed demonstrated a number of common ways in which sexual violence is ignored and those who experience it are demonised. Some of the members of the Disputes Committee chosen to investigate the claim were close friends of Smith. The woman who had come forward was questioned about her sexual history and alcohol use. She was made to feel that members of the Disputes Committee thought she was "a slut who asked for it". The Disputes Committee concluded that the accusation that Smith had raped and harassed her was "not proven." Four members of the SWP who discussed their misgivings about the Committee's decision on Facebook were expelled from the group. The woman who had accused Smith was not allowed to attend the SWP's conference to contest the Disputes Committee's decision. The SWP's response to this case resulted in hundreds of members resigning. Meanwhile, Solidarity (an Australian affiliate of the SWP) labelled the SWP's investigation of the rape claim "scrupulously fair".

While there was a significant outcry amongst people in left-wing circles about the way members of the SWP responded to sexual violence within their group, there was little reflection on the fact that many other left-wing organisations respond in a similarly toxic way. The lack of internal democracy within the SWP certainly hindered the efforts of those seeking change within the organisation, but informal social processes influenced by misogynist ideas about sexual violence can be just as destructive to the lives of sexual violence survivors.

Gendered violence is a key way in which women's oppression is maintained in our patriarchal society. In Australia, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men over the age of 15 have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 years (1). Violence perpetrated by men is the leading cause of preventable death, disability and illness in women aged 15-44 (2). Aboriginal women, poor women, women of differing abilities, and sex and gender diverse people are significantly more likely to experience sexual violence.

All too often, survivors of sexual violence are greeted with disbelief, anger, and defensiveness when they should be believed and supported. This happens in left-wing groups, our social movements, our friendship circles, our workplaces, and countless other places in society. While most left-wing groups and movements share a stated opposition to sexism, this does not make them immune to the misogynist assumptions which underlie victim blaming and which often come up when people are confronted by sexual violence committed by their friends or political comrades.

I was raped by someone who was involved in the Melbourne anarchist milieu in 2010. It was a horrible, frightening experience, made worse by the fact that it was someone who I had trusted as a friend and a political comrade. I was lucky, though. The friends, family members and people in the anarchist milieu I told about my experience believed me and the person who assaulted me is no longer welcome in many of Melbourne's political spaces. I know too many people who have had similar experiences, but who have been called liars, ignored, lost friends and comrades, or been forced to remain silent. I can't imagine how much harder it is for people who've survived sexual violence, and then been treated like this by those they thought they could trust, to keep on going.

When someone tells their friends or political comrades that they have experienced sexual violence, there are a number of common responses. Sometimes survivors who come forward are

completely ignored. People who know the person who perpetrated sexual violence will say that they 'don't want to take sides' and want to remain 'neutral.' Survivors are told that confronting a perpetrator of sexual violence will cause division in the movement or organisation. The personalities, political beliefs, lifestyles and appearance of survivors of sexual violence are scrutinised in minute detail. Survivors of sexual violence are called 'crazy' or seen as too emotional. If a survivor speaks out about violence they will often be presented as vindictively trying to wreck a perpetrator's reputation. Perpetrators are frequently defended as being a 'good person' or a 'good organiser', as though this should excuse their violence. People attempt to justify their inaction by saying that they don't want to act based on 'rumours' and that we should presume that a person accused of perpetrating sexual violence is 'innocent until proven guilty.' Some activists tell survivors not to go to the police, because of their role in supporting state oppression, but all too often provide no alternative forms of support.

These attitudes are used to justify a status quo within the left and within broader society in which the interests of those who perpetrate sexual violence are prioritised over those who are survivors of sexual violence. Part of the problem with many responses to sexual violence is that we have absorbed various legalistic ideas from state criminal 'justice' systems that are sexist and are used to justify legal inaction. For instance, the idea that we shouldn't rush to judge a person accused of committing violence and should instead presume that they are innocent. This flawed idea is used by many to argue that we should not take the word of survivors when they tell us they have experienced sexual violence. However, as Lisbeth Latham comments in a recent piece on the SWP, "If we think of the refrain 'people accused of rape are innocent until proven guilty' then the opposing logic also at play is that those marking allegations of rape 'are guilty of lying about the allegation until proven innocent.' Defendants and their supporters (both legal and extra-legal) focus their energy not on proving innocence, but on undermining the credibility of the survivor." We need to

reject the state's narrative about how we should deal with accusations of sexual violence.

It is crucially important for us to point out that when we perpetuate these ideas about sexual violence we are making a political choice which has disastrous consequences for survivors of sexual violence. We know that false accusations of sexual violence are incredibly rare. We know that forcing survivors to jump through endless hoops by demanding they provide 'proof' before we listen to and believe them is incredibly harmful and makes it extremely difficult or them to speak out about sexual violence. We know that our continual inaction allows perpetrators to continue abusing people within our communities with impunity. And we know that how we respond to sexual violence currently is killing our political organisations and movements, and frustrating their capacity to challenge sexism, racism, capitalism, and other forms of oppression and exploitation.

So, here's what I think needs to happen: We need to make a political choice to believe survivors of violence. We need to bring gendered violence out into the open by treating survivors with trust and compassion, rather than hostility. We need to take people at their word when they tell us that they have experienced violence, including gendered and sexual violence, without requiring them to tell us about every little detail of what happened. And more than this, we need to make a choice to prioritise survivors in our political work. This means that we should have survivor-centred responses to sexual violence – where the needs and desires of survivors determine our response. We need to be open to excluding people responsible for sexual violence, at the discretion of the survivor, from our political spaces, organisations, and movements. And we need to be prepared to support survivors in engaging with the people who harmed them through accountability processes, if that is what they'd like to do. Most of all, though, we need to make it a political priority to actively support sexual violence survivors

through all of the personal and political challenges that come in the aftermath of being assaulted.

Asking a perpetrator to leave an organisation or political space on the word of a survivor is often a point which divides people within the left. We have to remember that people are not entitled to be involved in our political spaces. Many of us would accept the need to reject an active Liberal Party member who wanted to join a radical political group based on their oppressive ideology. We need to be open to taking the same approach to those whose actions are a form of violent oppression. In my experience, knowing that I am unlikely to run into the person who raped me at a political space has made a world of difference to my ongoing recovery, especially in environments where I know I would be supported by those around me if I did see him. Asking someone to leave our spaces does not deny them their freedom or safety. But if we refuse to ask perpetrators to leave our spaces we are effectively risking the safety of survivors and forcing many survivors to self-exclude. Moreover, as women are a significant majority of sexual violence survivors, not dealing with sexual violence has the effect of reinforcing women's oppression in our movements.

Gendered violence does not occur in a social vacuum – any response we make within our organisations and movements will be limited in scope. We will never be truly safe or free from violence while we live in a society fundamentally shaped by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Excluding perpetrators from our spaces can enable survivors to feel relatively safe in our movements, but it doesn't prevent sexual violence from being committed in the first place or in other areas of society. To create a society in which sexual violence is no longer a tool of misogynist and racist oppression we need structural systemic change – in short, a revolution.

An essential part of fighting rape culture involves identifying these structural systems of oppression and exploitation which allow people to perpetrate sexual violence with impunity. We

need to fight the dominant ideologies that suggest that some people deserve to be victims of violence, and bear responsibility for the harm that is done to them – whether because of their clothes, race, gender identity; or because they are a refugee, poor, in prison, or a sex worker. Yet it is not enough to merely struggle against sexism and sexual violence at a structural or ideological level. If we are ever going to build the collective power required to challenge these systems of oppression we must make a committed effort to challenge violence and other actions which reinforce oppression within our political organisations, our social movements, our friendship groups and all other areas of life.

Why would anyone believe talk of a post-revolutionary society without sexism if we cannot support survivors of sexual violence in our midst and take a stand against those who perpetrate gendered violence among us?

There are tentative signs of a growing movement against sexual violence on the left. In 2004, three women were raped at a large punk festival in Philadelphia in the US. The concert organisers established two collectives to support the survivors and hold the rapists to account. The collectives became Philly's Pissed and Philly Stands Up which continued this work for a period of six years. Organisers of the 2012 Toronto and New York Anarchist book fairs asked people who had been accused of sexual violence, and who were not actively engaging in some sort of accountability process, to not attend the events. Closer to home, groups like A World Without Sexual Assault and Stepping Up in Melbourne have provided support to survivors, facilitated accountability processes, and run awareness-raising workshops. We need to continue to build on these political gains in our organising in Melbourne. One new project that that I am excited about aims to bring together collective wisdom about how organisations can respond to sexual violence in a way which genuinely supports survivors. This website resource will also gather together ideas about how tools like grievance collectives can be used to confront other oppressive behaviour, such as

racist or sexist conduct. We will be inviting anarchist, socialist, social justice, environmental and other activist groups to commit to acting in accordance with this advice. As part of this commitment, groups will need to run workshops where their members can discuss practical ways they can avoid perpetuating destructive responses to sexual violence and avoid reinforcing systemic oppression. (If you're interested in getting involved in this project, contact Anarchist Affinity and we'll pass your details on to the organising collective).

Conclusion

For too long sexual violence survivors have been sacrificed at the altar of 'movement building.' This approach has a massively destructive impact on survivors, but it also prevents us from creating the kind of movements that we need. We must create social movements that build the revolutionary collective power of the working classes to confront all systems of oppression and exploitation. But to do this we need to start practicing what we preach. We need to challenge misogynist attitudes about sexual violence within our midst and create enduring structures which allow us to support survivors and hold perpetrators to account. Only then can we genuinely claim to be fighting for anarchism and social justice.

Resources

'What is rape apologism?' - https://gethenhome.wordpress.com/2010/12/16/what-is-rape-apologism/

Em BC, 'Misogyny and the left – we need to start practicing what we preach' http://bccwords.blogspot.com.au/2012/12/misogyny-and-left-we-need-to-start.html

'Betrayal – a critical analysis of rape culture in anarchist subcultures' – http://libcom.org/library/betrayal-critical-analysis-rape-culture-anarchist-subcultures

Endnotes

(1) Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey, 2006.

(2) VicHealth (2004) 'The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence.'

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